

THE GORDON STOCKADE

Custer STATE PARK



SOUTH DAKOTA
DEPARTMENT OF
GAME, FISH & PARKS
PIERRE, SOUTH DAKOTA

The Gordon Stockade

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For many years persistent rumors of gold in the Black Hills had been in circulation. The Sioux Indians, it is believed, definitely knew that there were "nuggets" of gold in the Hills. It remained for the Custer Expedition of 1874, (perhaps, if all the facts were known, he was sent there to determine the authenticity of the rumors) to actually make an "official discovery" and take the word out to the world. It was July 30th when the first color was found by the miners who accompanied the expedition.

On August 3rd, Custer himself, accompanied Charley Reynolds as far as the Cheyenne River (near Edgemont) and sent him to Cheyenne, Wyoming, to telegraph the news to General Sheridan, his commander, at Chicago. This was done. Sheridan released the news and adventurers of the United States and many other countries began to plan on getting to the "gold diggings" and making a fortune.

Down at Sioux City there was such a group. By October 6th this expedition, organized by Collins and Russell, secretly left the Missouri River at Covington, Nebraska, on its west bank, for the long trip to the promised land. Twenty-six men, one woman and a boy constituted the party. They traveled in six oxen drawn covered wagons with five saddle horses as an escort.

Soon after leaving, John Gordon was duly elected as the leader. The group was divided into several parties as follows: (1) Capt. Tom Russell, Lyman Lamb, Eaf Witcher and Angus

McDonald. (2) B. B. Logan, Dan McDonald (Red Dan), James Dempster, James Powers, J. J. Williams, Thomas Quiner. (3) John Gordon, J. W. Brockett, Newton Warren, H. Bishop, Charles Long, Charles Cordeiro and Moses Aarons. (4) R. R. Whitney, Harry Cooper, David Aken and John Boyle. (5) Charles Blackwell, Thomas McLaren, Henry Thomas, D. G. Tallent, Annie D. Tallent and Robert E. Tallent, a nine-year-old boy.

This group entered what is now South Dakota near the present village, Wewela, and passed by a route that took them close to the present villages of Okreek, White River, Belvidere, Kadoka, Cottonwood, Elm Springs and up to Sturgis, where they turned southwest to enter the Black Hills. They found their way largely by retracing Custer's outgoing trail down to French Creek. They reached a point on French Creek, now about $2\frac{1}{2}$ miles down the creek from Custer, on the 23rd day of December, 1874. This was close to where Custer had made his camp in the Black Hills that summer, from August 1st to the 6th.

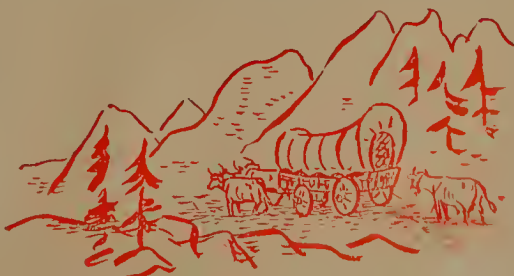
They had been 78 days enroute and both men and animals were footsore and weary. The next day was wash day and Christmas Day. It was pretty much just another day among the pioneers for they had no special food or other comforts to supply a festive spirit. The day after Christmas, a storm blew up and lasted for nearly a week. Great pitch pine fires dispelled the cold somewhat but the snow was deep and oxen, dependent upon grass, suffered terribly.

Even before the storm was over, work was started on the Stockade. Not only were these people in the country in contravention of military orders but they greatly feared that, as they were trespassers, the Indians might take their ejection in hand for themselves. Because water was a necessity, the stockade was built on the banks of the French Creek.

It was a structure 80 feet square, built of closely-set logs, thirteen feet in length and placed three feet into the ground; no easy task in the middle of winter. In each corner were bastions, with four embrasures each, and along the sides were portholes at eight foot intervals. A twelve foot, double gate occupied the middle of one side. It was a strong fortress and Captain Mix of the Regular Army who came to eject them reported: "If they had resisted I would have been compelled to return to the fort for artillery to dislodge them."

They felt secure against the Indians so long as their provisions and ammunition held out. Within the enclosure were seven log cabins, three on each side and one opposite the gate. These were placed six feet within the line of logs of the stockade and in the center was a large square or parade ground. The "Logan outfit" had the most pretentious cabin with a hewn log floor, a roof of hewn timbers with a groove for rain water in the center of each. This aggregation consisted of lumbermen from Wisconsin and they were able to make better use of the materials the country afforded for building. All of the cabins were not so well constructed.

The Tallent cabin was built of round logs with a pole roof covered with hemlock boughs and earth. They had neither window sash nor doors and an extra superfine flour sack served as a window with a coffee sack for a door.





Charles Cordeiro had a lean-to shack against the Tallent cabin with a small opening between, through which his keen axe could be passed in exchange for the Tallent iron pot.

Once the stockade was completed, a rocker was constructed and dirt from the creek bed was washed and a fair show of gold obtained.

On February 6th, 1875, John Gordon and Eaf Witcher left by horse for a return to Sioux City. It consumed twenty-three days but they took back word of the party's success. Gordon set out with supplies to reinforce the initial members, but before he reached the Black Hills, his party was apprehended by the military, the wagons and supplies burned and Gordon himself placed under military surveillance.

On February 14th, 1875, Blackwell and McLaren, with an ox drawn vehicle, part cart and part sled, set out from the Stockade to Fort Laramie. On March 6th, four others, Newton Warren, Red Dan McDonald, J. J. Williams and Henry Thomas decided that civilization looked better to them than the Gordon Stockade and set out, two on horseback, one aboard a donkey and one on foot, for Fort Laramie.

Fear of an Indian attack increased as spring advanced. The grass was burned out to the roots for a considerable distance back from the stockade.

During March, the pioneers interested themselves by platting a new city, along French Creek, the first in the Black Hills, which they named Harney City. In April, a violent but short-lived snow storm scattered the cattle and depressed the remaining members of the original party.

One evening before the storm was over, four horsemen rode through the great gate. They all wore military uniforms and two of them were J. J. Williams and Dan McDonald. They had reached Fort Laramie after a hard eight-day journey. Williams and McDonald had returned as guides for two U. S. Army Lieutenants from the 2nd Cavalry, who had come with a troop of cavalry under Captain Mix, a train of 25 pack mules and wagons and an ambulance. They were camped some 12 miles down stream and were there for the express purpose of taking the Gordon party out of the Black Hills.

The Gordon party was proclaimed prisoners, given 24 hours to collect their stock, and start out of the Hills. On April 6th, 1875, after three and a half months at the Gordon Stockade, they left with this escort for Fort Laramie. This party, the first to come into the Hills after the news of the gold find of 1874 had been spread to the world, took out little gold and left little record of their stay.

But the memory of that valiant party still remains. They wanted to be first on the ground, but ran afoul the military interpretation. This was a legal and justifiable one, even though later relaxed. They were run out of the Hills before gaining any advantages. A lot of hardship was the share for their temerity.

